Sustainable ecotourism in Costa Rica: the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve

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The paper discusses the sustainability of the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve in the context of Costa Rican ecotourism. While the history of the Preserve is somewhat unique, the analysis of visitation, financial, ecological and economic factors provides a convincing case that tourism at the Preserve is sustainable. The experience of the Preserve is also put in the context of Costa Rican ecotourism, particularly to the national parks. The paper concludes that the Preserve has played a very important role in the development of Costa Rica as an ecotourism destination. Nonetheless, the failure of experience at the Preserve to inform recent changes in national park pricing policy reveal that Costa Rica has yet to fully capitalize on the experience gained and lessons learned at the Preserve.

Keywords: ecotourism; economics; Costa Rica; sustainability; parks.

Introduction

Sustainable ecotourism is one of the environmental 'buzzwords' of the 1990s. However, few studies exist that attempt to actually document individual cases of sustainable ecotourism, particularly in developing countries. In part, this can be attributed to the difficulty of actually defining 'sustainability'. In this paper we do not devote much effort to discussions of what is and what is not sustainable ecotourism. Rather we take a known example of what would most likely qualify as a case of sustainable ecotourism and discuss how this example could be considered 'sustainable.' In the discussion of sustainability we focus on four aspects we believe are essential to sustainable ecotourism: visitation, finance, ecology and economics.

The setting for this paper is Costa Rica, a country with a growing reputation as an ecotourist destination. In the first section of the paper we review the history of ecotourism development in Costa Rica and provide an overview of the typical ecotourist coming to the country. We also provide an overview of the National Park System, in order to assess the relative importance of wildlife reserve tourism as opposed to beach and volcano tourism. This sets the stage for our case study of the sustainability of the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve, a private reserve owned and operated by the Tropical Science Center, a Costa Rican non-profit organization. Following a short review of the history behind the development of the Preserve we take each of the sustainability issues in turn. Our analysis of the visitation, financial and economic issues is largely based on previously unpublished data regarding visitation, financial flows, and tourist profiles developed by the Tropical Science Center. The discussion of ecological sustainability relies on prior analysis conducted for the Preserve and our personal and professional judgement. The case study is...
followed by a demonstration of the relative importance of the Preserve to Costa Rican ecotourism and a discussion of how recent events in the National Park System have seemingly been taken with little regard or reference to one of the country's most progressive and successful ecotourist destinations.

Ecotourism in Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a small country of 51,000 km\(^2\) inhabited by approximately 3.5 million people with per capita GNP of $2400 in 1993 (EIU, 1994). Traditionally, an agrarian economy depending heavily on resource-based products to earn foreign exchange, Costa Rica's export sector has witnessed a number of transformations over the last few decades. First coffee, then beef, then bananas and, currently tourism, all of these 'products' have seen periods of intense expansion in output culminating in their rise to the top of the export tables. Table 1 chronicles the recent rise of tourism which totalled 29% of total exports in 1993, just outdistancing the 27% recorded by banana production.

The boom in Costa Rica's tourism market began, more or less, in 1987. As seen in Fig. 1, international arrivals bottomed out in 1986 and, since then, have never looked back. In 1994, total arrivals topped 760,000, a 190% increase over the 260,000 arrivals registered in 1986. Between 1969 and 1982 arrivals rose steadily at an average of 9% per year as compared with the rapid 14% growth rate during the 1986 to 1994 period. As shown in Fig. 1, the dip in arrivals from 1982 to 1986 was largely tied to the fall in Central American arrivals from 215,000 in 1982 to 107,000 in 1986. During this period, European arrivals fell back somewhat, but North American arrivals continued upwards, albeit at a reduced pace.

Improvements in the global economic outlook in the late 1980s and early 1990s have clearly spurred the recent rise in tourist arrivals. On a regional front, this period coincided with the last days of the Sandinista regime and the difficult transition to a more market oriented economy in Nicaragua. Even during these difficult times for Costa Rica's neighbour to the north, the upswing in Central America arrivals (or immigrants) to Costa Rica was outpaced by the growth of visitors from North America. Indeed, Fig. 1 reveals that while the fall in international arrivals during the 1982–1986 period was largely due to changes in Central American arrivals, the rapid upswing since that time has been largely fuelled by the growth in North American, and to a lesser extent, European arrivals. Indeed, in 1988 the trend line for North American arrivals crosses that of Central American arrivals. To date the gap between North American and Central American arrivals continues to grow. Clearly, the tourist industry's relative ability to host additional visitors exceeds that of the country's ability to absorb economic immigrants from its poorer neighbours.

Table 1. Costa Rican output and exports

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<tr>
<td>Gross domestic product</td>
<td>5200</td>
<td>5700</td>
<td>5630</td>
<td>6530</td>
<td>7500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exports</td>
<td>1333</td>
<td>1354</td>
<td>1498</td>
<td>1714</td>
<td>1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>275</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>577</td>
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<tr>
<td>As percentage of exports</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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All figures in $US million.